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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impact of online bibliographic retrieval on the librarian's professional self-image. The question of online searching and professional status is raised primarily in response to Brian Nielsen's work in 1980 and 1982, and also motivated by the relatively low volume of work on this topic since Nielsen. A major aim of this study was to evaluate whether Nielsen's predictions about online searching deprofessionalizing librarianship were beginning to be realized. The study consisted of 8 interviews, lasting from 45 minutes to 3 hours, with librarians who do and supervise online searching in a variety of disciplines and settings. Thirty-three questions were asked under conditions of privacy to establish the basic background facts of each respondent's situation, and to elicit their perceptions of the effect of online searching on: (1) their image; (2) their role as teacher or as intermediary; (3) their interaction with patrons and end users; (4) their careers; and (5) their own personal attitudes toward online searching and its impact on their professional status. It was concluded that, although automation has made many tasks more routine, its effects have been an enhancement. In most situations where searches were being negotiated, librarians felt that they gave patrons more individualized attention. Furthermore, librarians generally felt that the addition of a computer had a professionalizing effect on librarianship. Copies of the interview questions and privacy statement are appended. (29 references) (SD)

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ONLINE SEARCHING AND THE STATUS OF LIBRARIANSHIP:

An Inquiry, Spring 1988

Suzanne S. Bell
May 3, 1988

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Online Searching and the Status of Librarianship:

An Inquiry, Spring 1988

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The author wishes to extend most sincere thanks to the busy and vital professionals who gave so generously of their time and energy during the interviews for this project. While some views were shared, each one also brought out unique or illuminating aspects of the issue. Their contributions have been invaluable.

I. Introduction

The use of computers in libraries has increased dramatically in the last two decades, and represents a major change in a field which has traditionally been highly labor intensive. The introduction of automation seems to have highly disparate effects on the various occupations it touches within the library. The information processing functions required for circulation and cataloging can now largely be automated, which has been a great boon in terms of speed, accuracy, availability of information. Computerization of these activities is generally held to have had little, if any, enhancing effects on librarians' professional self-image or the external perception of the librarians' image. Similarly, online bibliographic retrieval - the computerized, interactive searching of vast databases of information - represents an unprecedented addition to the reference librarian's repertory of resources. However, the addition of a computerized tool to the reference task seems to immediately raise strong questions and opinions as to its effect on the profession's image and self-image. On the one hand, if an activity so dependent on individual skill, creativity, and accumulated knowledge can be automated, then where is the value added by the "trained" librarian? On the other hand, if librarians must also be computer professionals, is not their value greatly multiplied? How are relations with patrons affected? Does automated searching enhance or detract from the librarian's image, from the perception of librarianship as a whole? Unlike circulation or cataloging, the impact on status of adding computers to reference service is still being determined.

This study was undertaken to assess the attitudes of a variety of librarians regarding the effect online searching may or may not have on their status as professionals. The question of online searching and status is raised primarily in response to Brian Nielsen's work in 1980[1] and '82[2], but was also motivated by the relatively low volume of work on this specific topic since Nielsen. The latter situation suggested that a series of interviews might be the best method for determining current, "real world" impressions about the effect online searching has on the status of librarianship.

The study consisted of eight interviews, lasting from 45 minutes to 3 hours, with librarians who do and who supervise online searching. Thirty-three questions were asked (Appendix A), under conditions of privacy (Appendix B), to establish the basic background facts about each respondent's situation and then their opinions on

[1]Brian Nielsen, "Online bibliographic searching and the deprofessionalization of librarianship," Online Review 4 (3) 1980:215-24.
[2]Id., "Teacher or Intermediary: Alternative Professional Models in the Information Age," C&RL 43 (May 1982):183-91.

the affect of online searching on their image, patron and end user relationships, careers, and attitudes. Six of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed; responses for the remaining two interviews were taken as notes. The results were then organized and summarized in chart form, to facilitate comparison and to highlight especially pertinent quotations for inclusion in this report.

This project was initiated with a review of the literature, in order to become familiar with the issues and put together a reasonable set of questions. The results of this review are summarized in the next section. Section III gives a description of the interview subjects. Summarized responses to the questions, as well as individual remarks, appear in Section IV. Section V presents my conclusions, an additional issue suggested as a result of this research, and a word about the most recent addition to reference service.

II. Literature Review

Nielsen's 1980 article on deprofessionalization represents a unique and pioneering work, in its exploration of the issues raised by applying Toren's sociological model[1] to librarianship. Toren's model postulates that "technological advances can make professional knowledge no longer esoteric and special,"[2] thus leading to deprofessionalization. (The idea of knowledge that is "esoteric and special" to a profession is an important one, which shall be addressed again later.) As applied to librarianship, the fear is that online searching will become so simplified, packaged, and popularized that the "user friendly systems...will soon overcome the few remaining barriers to quick and easy use of online systems,"[3,4] leading to "a declining role for librarian intermediaries in the future."[5] Such a decline may come not only from within the library, but from outside competition as well, as the "information industry has ... devolved control from society's institutionalized information retailers (i.e., librarians) to a much wider population of technocrats."[6] On the other hand, a study in a corporate environment indicated that the need for search intermediaries would not be threatened "for a long time," due to the scientists and engineers "not [sharing] equally the verbal facility and sensitivity to syntax that is necessary for effective online searching."[7]

In actuality, Nielsen finds librarian reactions (as indicated via surveys) are almost universally positive: it has a professionalizing influence, will mean better salaries, etc.[8] The surveys indicate that librarians involved in online, especially in academia, are interested in promoting the service to users, and to other librarians (i.e. through training). Respondents indicated that they were eager to do more searching, despite the finding that online services are more time consuming and require more individual contact time with patrons than other forms of reference work.[9,10,11] This last perception is curiously reversed by another author, who states that "online searching...has not had a dramatic effect on the nature of the

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[1]Nielsen, "Online...", 217.
[2]L. Tashi and P. Havard-Williams, "Transfer of Information," International Library Review 18 (October 1986): 304.
[3]John Akeroyd, "Trends in information provision in polytechnic libraries," Aslib Proceedings 34 (October 1982): 452.
[4]echoed in Tashi and Havard-Williams, 304.
[5]Nielsen, 219.
[6]Margaret Myers, "The Job Market for Librarians," Library Trends 34 (Spring 1986): 881, quoting Blaise Cronin, "Post-industrial Society," Journal of Information Science 7 (1983):1-14.
[7]Bruce Bonta, "Online Searching in the Reference Room," Library Trends 31 (Winter 1983):505, quoting Robert J. Richardson, "End-User Online Searching..." Online 5(Oct. 1981):44-57.
[8]Ibid., quoting Atherton and Kilgour, 215.
[9]Nielsen, 220-221.
[10]Russ Chenoweth, "The Integration of Online Searching in Reference Service," Reference Librarian 5/6 (Fall/Winter 1982): 125.
[11]Charles A. Bunge, "Reference desk staffing patterns: Report of a survey," RQ 26 (Winter 1986):176.

librarian-user interaction."[1]

Online was also found to be a morale booster, an autonomy builder (i.e. less subject to allocation and control by administrators), and a role definer: it can provide "greater differentiation from support staff,"[2] and is a "new opportunity for the library profession to define its work jurisdiction."[3] It should be noted, however, that these positive perceptions regarding role definition are from *within the profession*. At least one study in an academic environment demonstrated that even where 51% of faculty contact with librarians was the result of online searching, faculty (outside) perceptions of librarians were not greatly altered.[4]

In contrast to the negative predictions regarding end users eliminating librarians' role in online searching, Charles Meadow has continually advocated increased searching by end users as a way to enhance librarians' professional roles.[5,6,7] His basic premise is that end users will do the simple searches, and bring the more complex, in-depth ones to librarians, highlighting the librarian's more sophisticated skills and greater technical expertise - their 'professional-ism.' As with doctors, "I handle the easy, general cases, and the experts handle the difficult cases."[8] This attitude is repeated by writers in a number of contexts: legal reference,[9] academic science reference,[10] general academic reference,[11] etc. The writers in favor of end user searching, particularly those in academic settings, see it as an "opportunity...to play a major role in the online *education* of many individuals."[12] [Italics mine] Thus promotion of end user searching reinforces the role of the librarian as a teacher, disseminator, and consultant on skills. This theme brings us to the second major article by Nielsen on alternative professional models: "Teacher or Intermediary."

This work is an excellent study of the literature regarding two traditional role models for reference librarians, how they are defined, argued for, etc.

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[1]Prudence W. Dalrymple, "Closing the Gap: The Role of the Librarian in Online Searching," RQ 24 (Winter 1984):179.
[2]Nielsen, "Online...," 223.
[3]Gale Moore, "Reassessing the social impacts of new technology," Canadian Library Journal 44 (December 1987):423.
[4]Gaby Divay, et al. "Faculty Perceptions of Librarians at the University of Manitoba," C&RL 48 (January 1987):28, 35.
[5]Charles Meadow, "On-line searching and computer programming: some behavioral similarities," Online 3 (January 1979):52.
[6]Id., "End user searching," [letter], Library Journal 108 (1 Sept. 1983):1622-23.
[7]Roger K. Summit and Charles T. Meadow, "Emerging Trends in the Online Industry," Special Libraries 76 (Spring 1985):92.
[8]Meadow, "End user searching," 1622-23.
[9]Richard A. Danner, "Reference Theory and the Future of Legal Reference Service," Law Library Journal 76 (Spring 1983):232.
[10]Dorice Des Chene, "Online Searching by End Users," RQ 25 (Fall 1985):90.
[11]Linda Friend, "Independence at the terminal: Training student end users to do online literature searching," Journal of Academic Librarianship 11 (July 1985):140.
[12]Ibid., 141.

Nielsen also demonstrates how reference work in general may be seen as a "core task," one that "in the public mind provides a ready identification for the profession as a whole that conveys status, the performance of special and esoteric skills, and a sense of the critical role that the professional members play."[1] The analogies to such high-status professions as law or medicine are readily apparent, although the danger of relying on such "borrowed models" is pointed out.[2,3]

The role of online searching in the teacher or intermediary debate can be quite incendiary. A recent article by Gale Moore points out that "for professionals, the emphasis should be on expanding the aspects of their work that are non-routine, indeterminate, and require discretion"[4] - attributes of intermediated searching. The intermediary position "has always had the edge" for those concerned with status, and online searching has been and for the most part continues to be an intermediated task [5,6] This creates a very thorny problem for the adherents of the teacher role, who advocate instructing and creating informed, independent patrons. Indeed, "to teach others...is to practice the most professional aspects of librarianship."[7] Atkinson also suggests redefining professionalism as "the transfer of a skill to the patron."[8]

All of the literature referred to above shares an underlying assumption that there is a problem with the status of librarianship. Online searching has provided an interesting new element to the evaluation of this status - has it helped? Can all the positive feelings it generates be trusted? If status has been enhanced, will it be devalued by an upsurge of end users? Should we be creating those end users? Finally, how do those currently working in the profession feel about online's influence on the status issue - or is status an issue? The interviews were designed to explore these issues "in the real world."

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[1]Nielson, "Teacher...," 184-5.
[2]Ibid., 188.
[3]Rejean Savard, "Toward a New Model of Professionalism?" RQ 25 (Summer 1986):498-99, 504. (He advocates a "field-specific model" of professionalism.)
[4]Gale Moore, "Reassessing the social impacts of new technology," Canadian Library Journal 44 (December 1987): 423.
[5]Oddly enough, a recent study of educational textbooks found the librarian/intermediary notably missing from their descriptions of online searching, although the books pre-date end user searching.
[6]Mark Schumacher, "Images of Computer Searching: Depictions in Educational Research Textbooks," RQ 26 (Winter 1986):202.
[7]Elizabeth Frick, "Humanizing technology through instruction," Canadian Library Journal 41 (October 1984):264.
[8]Hugh C. Atkinson, "Two Reactions to Change," Library Journal 109 (August 1984):1427.

III. The Interview Subjects

The real world in this case was made up of eight librarians from a variety of settings and disciplines: academic, public, corporate; science, humanities, and business. Years of service ranged from nine to thirty-two. Seven interviews used the same set of questions, regardless of the individual's rank. One department head was asked slightly different questions, to test another point of view; those results are inserted in places where interesting differences arose. As promised at each interview, in the interests of privacy no names will appear within the paper [Appendix B]. If important to the context a source will be identified generically ("public librarian")[1]. It should be noted that the results are probably weighted to a positive perception of online searching, due to an inherent bias in obtaining subjects for the project. The first names were chosen based on previous contact regarding searching. In settings without a known contact, the description of the need tended to steer my request to people who are known for searching. And as noted in many of the interviews, if you like it, you search more, and the more you search, the more you like it. "Online searching" in this study included both bibliographic and "ready reference" type database searches.

[1]Otherwise, source identification will be by number. A key is provided to derive source names from their number.

IV. Interview Responses

The interview questions [Appendix A] were arranged in topical groups to address issues brought out in the literature. Not all questions were applicable to every situation; there are some gaps in responses as a result. Questions 15 and 15a (regarding competition with private search services) proved not to really apply to any of these situations, and are not included in the following results.

The first set of questions asked for some "hard data" and general information which would provide a relatively equal basis for comparison among institutions. The question on whether or not searching was only done by professional staff also addresses the notion of the use of online to further differentiate librarians from staff.

Numbers of librarians actively searching in each institution ranged from 1.5 to about 22, and all are professional (MLS-holding) staff. One discrepancy came up with this question, in that one institution's department head stated definitely that only librarians did searches (although hourly staff would "dearly love" to do online) [41], while a second interview subject in the same facility said that some nonprofessional staff *did* do searches (and more were anxious to do so). [09] Numbers of searches performed ranged from 110 to 2200, representing ~34 - 200/searcher. The low number is, interestingly, from a science library; the high end is predictably from a special library. In all situations searches are basically allocated by subject specialty (i.e. even in cases of requests being routed through one Search Coordinator, they are still allocated according to subject). All of those interviewed thus felt fairly autonomous regarding the performance of this task. Public librarians feel particularly so, as the service is not an advertised one[1], but is used solely at the discretion of the librarians. All the librarians suggest (or use) searching as an alternative, if appropriate.

In response to "how informed are the clients?" predictably, the patrons in the sciences tend to be more familiar and informed about the search service/process, the humanities less so. The academic respondents all make a strong effort to educate the requestors, both on an individual basis (at the point of filling out the search request) and through classes. Bibliographic instruction is a very active area in all academic situations, and online searching is always mentioned, in more or less detail according to the audience. Actual 'end user training' in only being offered in two cases: for chemistry and engineering students. The latter is a credit class taught by the librarian, who warns the students that "once you're out on your own you're not going to have a librarian to help you very much

[1]That is, it is not available at request on a fee basis. Searching costs are currently absorbed by the library through special funds.

and you'd better know how to find your own information..." [23] A training course was tried in the special library, but within six months was abandoned due to lack of interest (all 150 participants dropped out).

The second section of questions examine perceptions of image, and test Nielsen's idea of reference as a "core task." Question 14, regarding the effect of computerization on an occupation's image, was prompted by an editorial bearing the catchy title of "The Computer Mystique and the Librarian's Image: Wherein Marian Sees Her Reflection on the Screen."[1]

The question of image (Do librarians have an image problem?) turned out to be much more interesting than expected. Answers ranged from "*they* think they do" (referring to the literature; the subject had no problems with "image") [09] to "obviously" to "traditionally yes" but changing for the better, to no problem at all - the Public Librarian says they feel well respected by their community. [21] (This was particularly interesting, since some Academic Librarians had theorized that Public Librarians might have the worst feelings about their image.) Two (non-corporate) respondents felt that the "information specialists" in industry may provide the best vehicle for moving away from the "ugly" librarian stereotype ("crotchety old ladies" in public schools) to one that is more respected.[01,23] The most definite answer ("obviously") pointed out some obvious problems: the Librarian of Congress is not (an MLS), nor is the Librarian of Alaska; this is an age of specialization, wherein the generic skills of the librarian are downplayed, etc.[31] A much more moderate response felt that every profession has an image problem of some kind, and observed that *patrons* don't necessarily think about whether librarians are professionals or not, and it may not matter in either case.[52] Unconsciously, however, the respondent's next comments did indicate something about the way patrons perceive librarians, since "you would never ask a doctor or lawyer 'Gee, how did you learn all this stuff?' because everybody knows they went to school for [it]" [52] - but obviously this is a question that is asked of librarians. Overall, however, it was clear that none of the interviewees themselves had an "image problem."

All librarians agreed that reference work has a major impact on how librarianship as a whole is perceived, because it is a main contact point. This view was tempered in one case by pointing out that patrons are not *forced* to come to the reference desk as they are, say, to circulation, [09] and in another by noting that ILL and Reserve are also strong patron contact points.[41] Several responses added that personality was very important at the desk, i.e. how much

[1]Jim Dwyer, "The Computer Mystique and the Librarian's Image," Technicalities 6 (October 1986):1+.

damage a "grouch" [23] can do to overall perceptions of the profession.

Reference work is not necessarily the creme de la creme of library jobs, however. The spectrum of answers to question 11 ranged from reference work not being singled out as "desirable" amongst librarians,[21] through various intensities of agreement, to "definitely the highest status."[31] One of those agreeing spoke of the status of reference work as something that is developing from the changing nature of librarianship: the emphasis is no longer on amassing collections (because no one can hope to own everything), but on the delivery of information, which reference work attempts to do. Also, while technology has made other library jobs more routine, its effect on reference is to make it more obvious, more necessary: the reference function is very much needed to cope with the information "explosion."[01,41] One managerial regarding searching viewpoint is that people "aspire to it - it is prestigious to do," although this interest did not seem to cross disciplinary boundaries (there weren't any catalogers who suddenly wanted to become reference librarians).[41]

As one librarian pointed out, the enthusiasm for online stemming from its image-enhancing properties is a staple of the literature.[09] In their actual situations, however, all agreed that the enthusiasm for online had much more to do with its usefulness and power as a reference tool. The effect on image (if any), is to make them seem "with the times" [52], having "technical expertise" [31] or "special skills" [11]; an activity that makes their subject expertise more apparent [01]. That patrons may perceive librarians as "better able to help with the computer" was thought to be an unfortunate, actually diminishing, side effect on status in one case.[21]

Does the introduction of computerization have a "professionalizing" effect? Most librarians felt, more or less intuitively, that it did - a computer "looks more technical," [31] gives a "much more tangible expression of ... skills" [09]. As an example of the computer's impact on popular perceptions, one librarian related a story of the awe and respectful retreat of a patron put off by a secretary's saying "[librarian's] doing a search right now." [23] However, it was also emphasized that computerization can as easily make a task routine and therefore less professional, and "how you permit yourself to be perceived depends on what you will do with that computer." [01] Two respondents were firm in that the computer may make people feel librarians are "With It," but that this did not make them more or less professional.[21,52]

A manager's response to the previous question was that the 'computer effect' was overstated - "it takes more than computers," but all the same felt that online is an important aspect of the overall reference department's image, and a skill

that enhances the status of the reference staff. [41]

Section III is based on the teacher/ intermediary question, and the interviews produced strong advocates on both sides. The librarians most heavily involved in science and technology replied with great certainty that the intermediary role increased the status of librarians; one even mentioned that teaching did not carry high status in society so [that role model] wouldn't help librarians. [31] Meanwhile, for several academic and public librarians the "obvious answer is [that of] Teacher." [09] Although even where the policy is to teach, one librarian realistically observed that if information were just handed over patrons might well have a higher opinion [of the librarian] - "less work for them!" [11]

Online searching presents a difficulty for the "teachers," though, as mentioned above, since it is still by and large a *mediated* service. Even so, whenever patrons know a search has been done it is perceived more and less strongly as a status enhancing activity. (From "Any fool can look in a book - the initiated priesthood asks the magic machine" [31] to "[patrons are] more receptive to it - bored out of their minds with how to retrieve information from printed sources" [09])

Section IV addressed issues of patrons both as "clients" and end users. For the majority of situations publicly offering online services, this has produced a significant change in librarian-user interaction. Online patrons receive more attention and more time, often in a more private setting. The exceptions were the special library, where in-depth, private research interviews have always been standard; and one academic library, in which it is felt that manual and online searches are negotiated with equal care.

Question 18 was originally intended more as a lead-in to the next question, but the results trace a small trend in themselves: the two situations placing the most emphasis on having the patron present for the search do the least number of searches/librarian.[01,23] As the proportion goes up, the number of times the patron is present goes down, which may be seen as supporting those who feel a patron's participation does not always provide the most <u>efficient</u> conditions for searching. It follows that those who prefer the patron to be present also feel that this produces significantly different reactions to the search efforts, of a positive and educational nature.[01,23] A common theme (in 4 out of a possible 6 institutions) was that having the patron present was useful in "poor result" searches, as patrons were much more accepting of such an outcome when they had witnessed the process.[01,09,11,23]

As none of the institutions visited had an active population of end users

using online services[1], questions 21-22a were really not applicable. However, none of the respondents had any fear of end users making their online skills obsolete or devalued.

Question 23 regarding patrons' preference for assistance (human or machine) turned out to be weak for some reason, and the responses are not included here. However, the main point was again the following question, which was asked regardless of the answer to the previous question. The possibility of searching being packaged enough to "deprofessionalize" it was greeted with resounding declarations of the "not a chance" variety.

The fifth section inquired about the subject's observation or perception of the "external effects" online may have had on attitudes and careers. That is, how did people react to its implementation - was it a morale booster? In situations where more than one person was involved in learning (and the service was instituted recently enough to remember), it was agreed that online had acted as a morale booster. A manager felt that it had had very positive effects, and that one measurable impact was changes in staffing patterns.[41] One person suggested that it continued as a morale builder, *for those enthusiastic about it already.*[09] For those intimidated or threatened, online searching obviously did not have a positive effect on morale, although no one was ever forced to learn. Perhaps it would have if the answer to the next question had been uniformly and unequivocally positive.

Question 26: has online searching had any effect on salaries? was usually answered with laughter, and more or less negative responses: "no way!" [21], "don't think so" [52], "it ought to, not sure it has" [01], "would think it would have, but probably not a conscious thing" [23]. Those not sure of a direct correlation with searching did mention that they thought salaries in general "may have gone up."[52,01] Only in two cases (both department heads, one in a special library) was this treated as a serious question, with a positive answer: salaries for literature searchers there are higher than the norm, and this is directly based on their extra skills and expertise.[31,41] Note that these are "extra" skills: where online is added on to an existing useful package of abilities, salaries reportedly go up.[41]

Question 27 asked "where do you see yourself going from this position?" None the librarians interviewed seemed to be actively contemplating a career move at this time, although most felt their online skills would be an advantage in the job market. Stronger replies came from two department heads. One emphasized that online skills were definitely an important criterion in hiring decisions, both at

[1]The CD-ROM issue cropped up here (and elsewhere); as the focus here is online, these comments are artificially suppressed here and will be mentioned as part of the concluding remarks.

that institution and elsewhere.[41] Another manager stressed how important knowledge of online is not just in performing the reference function but in managing other searchers: it is necessary for evaluating their work, for instruction, for promoting the service, and to understand patron/staff interactions.[01]

From this small group, it was not possible to really identify any trends in terms of career changes directly connected with online skills, either in individual replies or from the collective result. There were one or two instances of each possibility, i.e. of librarians moving from academic to corporate, or vice versa, of librarians going into administration, or simply moving to better jobs in similar (library) settings. The importance of online skills varied in each case. (If anything, one might say there is a trend to be static, as exemplified in the special library, where "60% of the searchers have explicitly stated that they have no desire to go into management. They are happy doing what they do and don't want the headaches of administration." [31])

The last section was looking for very personal, off-the-cuff feelings regarding online searching ("internal effects"). All the interview subjects are definitely very fond of this activity - what is so attractive about it? The replies were many-faceted, from toys to beauty. It is "like a logical puzzle - a challenge" [01], "a toy to play with" [31]; it has a "gamelike quality - they're paying me for doing this?!" [09] It is mentally stretching, a "new way of looking at things," stimulating because it prompts more interaction amongst searchers [21], or simply makes a job more interesting.[11] It is something that is different every day, that provides rapid feedback and a sense of accomplishment, of satisfaction, because one can see things completed, and "a good search is a thing of beauty." [31] Interestingly enough, of those asked whether they would like to do more searching, no one strongly wished to do so - at least not at the expense of their other duties.

The inquiry as to whether people felt better about their work as a result of online was not always applicable, since several had always had online as part of their job. However, of the rest, three replies stand out. The first is firmly negative - online is interesting, but the job would feel just as good with it or without it.[21] The other two are positive: one librarian definitely likes the job better since the addition of online [11], the other elaborated further that "you feel as if *you're* in control of your own work environment ... activity... timing and spacing [while you're doing it], it's original" which "makes up for other parts." [09]

The last question was prepared from a devil's advocate stance, asking whether

all of the preceding discussion of status was even an issue. It was expected that some of subjects would take this opportunity to effectively sink the whole topic, and indeed several cheerfully did so!

Up to this point, it has been attempted to report interview results anonymously both in name and gender. However, since the responses to this last question seemed to be more particularly "gender divided," it may be interesting to identify them in this respect. The librarians for whom the status issue is "kind of irrelevant" [23], something they've "never been too worried [about]" [09], and who believe "you don't get respect, you earn it - on an individual level" [31] were all male. Those who enlarged on the theme were not unsympathetic, in the final assessment, but they were firm: "librarians spend too much time moaning and worrying because nobody loves them - if you want to be loved you're in the wrong business!" [31] and "the bow-ers and scrapers, in spite of all the work they do, hurt our image...that's [not] a proper way for a professional to act." [23]

This is not to imply that status was a major priority for all the female respondents - they also asserted stances such as "status will happen if we are achieving excellence in providing our product" [41] - but they were much more likely to acknowledge it as an issue: "Don't waste time on it, but keep it in mind" [01]; "...should always be concerned with how one is perceived by others, but decide why you're concerned" [52]; "status is important to any person in any field, it helps morale" [11]; "we know what we do and that we do a good job at it...[but it would be helpful if our funding source had a better perception of librarianship]" [21]. One person also thought it likely that "more men have gotten into librarianship on the 'coattails' of online searching, increasing the number of men in libraries" and right or wrong, this trend may "help the image of the field." [01]

V. Conclusion

One of the major points of this study was to find out whether or not Nielsen's 1980 predictions were beginning to be realized, i.e. if online searching is deprofessionalizing librarianship. The consistent response to this issue was a definite "no."

Instead, the feelings are still quite positive. Online searching is an activity reserved for professional staff, and they have a certain amount of autonomy over this task in that requests are allocated according to subject speciality rather than by administrative order. Automation has made other library tasks more routine, but its effect on the reference function has been an enhancement. In most situations where searches are being negotiated, librarians are giving patrons much more individual attention. Right or wrong, the librarians generally felt that the addition of a computer had had a professionalizing effect on librarianship. They all emphasized, however, that the motivation for incorporating online into the reference services was its usefulness as a tool, and not its image-enhancing qualities.

The addition of online searching was usually a morale builder for the reference staff, and in some cases has had positive effects on salaries. It was not possible to determine any particular effects online may have had on career trends, although all agreed that online skills would be important in the job market. Unlike the respondents in Nielsen's report, although these librarians enjoy searching, they are not pressing to do more searching at the expense of any other task.

Most of the librarians believe very strongly that their role should be an educational one: the "teacher" model. Online searching creates something of a moral conflict in these situations, since high costs and lack of facilities have necessitated the librarian's continuing in an intermediary role for this reference activity. A great deal of time and energy may go into `educating' the requestor, but online searching does not appear to lend itself to wide spread instruction. In the end the librarian does the search. Several comments made in connection with this situation bring up an issue which deserves mention here.

This theme appeared repeatedly in the interviews and in the reading: the willingness to create end users, but that "actual usage after instruction was disappointing."[1] The corporate training program mentioned earlier started with 150 people and was discontinued after six months due to lack of interest. Another librarian mentioned that users "would just as soon I did it" [23], and there were

[1]Dorice Des Chene, "Online Searching by End Users," RQ 25 (Fall 1985):89.

several other references to that effect. All those questioned were completely confident about the security of their role as searchers. Why are end users not more interested? The usual arguments are the "hassle and the expense" [08], but Americans are fond of many activities that involve those qualities (owning a car, for instance). The persistent impression given by the literature and the interviews was that people in other fields did not feel the acquisition and retention of online skills were worth the expenditure of their time and effort.

Searching, whether in a library or business environment, seems to devolve down to a specific core of enthusiasts. This is not in itself a problem - it certainly leaves librarians in (almost sole) possession of "esoteric and specialized" skills. My concern is that at some point the majority's lack of interest will affect how much that skill is valued. Librarians may be left with a specialized, finely honed skill that no one is particularly interested in. This is not deprofessionalization exactly, it's simply a falling-by-the-wayside. (Part of the problem is that online, while it may be "gamelike," is definitely an *intellectual* game. Americans usually respect intellectualism, but would rather avoid or ignore it if possible.)

This study was concerned with online searching, but it seems one cannot close without a mention of the latest development. Librarians have recently been offered another option that preserves the integrity of the teacher role. That is, of course, the CD ROM, and it is making an impact on the provision of online service, particularly in larger academic libraries.

Academic libraries seem to be in the forefront in terms of acquiring and promoting the use of CD ROMs; the subject did not come up in the special library and the public library has reservations about them. Advantages mentioned by academic librarians were that CD ROMs have helped the staff who were intimidated and fearful of online (this technology is less threatening); [they] really make it fun to work with people and holds their attention [41]. The introduction of CD ROMs has caused searching in the equivalent online databases to fall off dramatically. [08] (Although as another librarian observed, deprofessionalization may not be a problem yet, since the users "still seem to need lots of help from the librarians!" [11])

It is not that this enthusiasm is ill-placed. CD ROMs are indeed marvelous tools. I would only add a psychological assessment, that CD ROM offers a way out of all the things that make librarians feel guilty about online: there are no fees (yet); it sits there and can be used over and over, like a book; and it can be *taught*. Like the printed indexes, users can be instructed and then left to do the research themselves. CD ROM "fits" with certain basic tenets of the teacher role model, and I would suggest that this is a strong part of its attraction. At the

same time, like online, CD ROM has the desirable quality of being technological and "up to date," which answers the desire (voiced or not) for image enhancement. (Let us just not forget that online also offers great variety, versatility, currency, and incredibly powerful interdisciplinary capabilities.)

Finally, no matter how it's done, eroding the old stereotypes of librarians is a very important effort. It will benefit the profession, the individuals in the profession, and the user populations served by the profession. The more accessible and knowledgeable librarians appear, the more patrons will make use of and have confidence in their abilities. [52] This will enrich the patrons' lives, which is, after all, the point of a service profession.

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APPENDIX A

questions for interviews: impact of online searching on status of librarians

Name:

Title:

Yrs. of service:

background/context ?s

1. How many staff are involved in online searching?

2. Are they exclusively reference, MLS holding- librarians?

3. Who decides, or are there established guidelines, for the allocation of searches (you do this one, X does that one, etc....) ? <<point of importance: you or your administrators - i.e. are you autonomous?>>

4. Approximately how many searches are done per year?

5. Is there one primary client group using the service - or is the requesting population fairly diverse?

6. How informed are the clients? (how much do they seem to know when requesting a search?)

7. Do you ever suggest searching without being specifically asked?

8. If you provide bibliographic instruction, what is the audience and what to what extent is online searching discussed/taught?

the "image" thing

This is an old question, but we need it to start this next section:

9. Do you think librarians have an "image problem"? - i.e. especially in the sense of being regarded as professional vs. non-professional

10. Do you think reference work in particular might affect the way librarianship as a whole is perceived? why? *<<Nielsen's "core task" idea>>*

11. Awful question, and just between us and the wall, but, do you think that reference work generally has rather more status attached to it than other types of library work - as perceived by other librarians, then by patrons:

12. Even though it was introduced in the '70's, online searching is probably one of the hotter topics - still. Do you think part of the enthusiasm might stem from the notion that it affects the IMAGE of librarians, as well as being a powerful tool?

13. IF YES: how would you describe the new image?

14. Do you think the introduction of a computer affects the way an occupation is perceived in terms of its "Professional-ism"? for people considering the that type of work and for users.

15. Do you see the online services performed here, by librarians, as competing with outside, private search services?

15a. IF YES: what then do you think is or should be your "edge" in terms of being perceived as being as good or better at it than the private concern - e.g. do you need to be a "computer scientist" or a "subject specialist" - ? be (is it an issue to compete?)

<u>the teacher vs. intermediary issue</u>

Traditionally, there seem to be two camps of reference librarians: the "teachers" and the "intermediaries." Their stands might be crudely summarized as: the teachers feel an informed, self-directed clientele will actually function to increase the status and sophistication of the reference function, by handling the basic tasks themselves and turning to the reference librarian with increasingly demanding queries. The intermediaries use their expertise to provide information as a "finished product" to the user, who knows little about the process involved. There is what we might term a sense of mystery about the intermediary's skills and methods.

<<would rather keep the public in a dependent role, fearing obsolescence. The resulting "mystery" of their functioning thus heightens and preserves their status.>>

16. Which of these roles do you feel has a better chance of increasing the status of librarians? (why - your experience, etc.)
<< teaching is analogous to teachers; intermediary is analogous to MDs >>

17. How does online searching figure as a part of the <u>Teacher / Intermediary</u> role? (whichever they chose)
and is online an important 'status enhancing' element ?

<u>patrons and end users</u>

18. Has online significantly changed the nature of librarian-user interaction, do you think? (length of interviews, *where do interviews take place?*)

19. How often are patrons present for a search?

20. When patrons are present, have you noticed significantly different reactions to your efforts than if the search is simply handed over to them?

21. I guess we should address the question of end users. If you have patrons doing their own searches, do you find your interaction with them increasing or decreasing?

Charles Meadow is one of those Big Names in the online field; and he is an advocate of disseminating online skills - having users do their own simple searches but continuing to bring the more complex ones to the professionals (that's you) to perform.

22. Do you think that's a valid viewpoint? is that the way it seems to work in your end user situations?

22a. IF YES: So you don't feel like enlightened end users are going to put you out of your job?

23. There is a lot of action lately in the development of "user friendly" systems; "front ends" and such. let's not address the issue of how effective these are, but rather, as a general rule, do you think users would prefer to obtain their assistance this way, or via a human resource (i.e. ask you) ?

24. *IF HUMAN>>* so at least in some respects it doesn't look like they can codify and package searching enough to "deprofessionalize" your job?

<u>effects of online on general attitudes and careers</u>

25. Did you, and did you notice among fellow staff, any sort of alteration in morale connected with implementation of online?

26. Do you think online searching has had any effects on salaries?

27. Where do you see yourself going - if you do - from this position?

28. Do your searching skills have any impact on what you would/could choose to do next? (positive / negative)

29. Have you noticed any trends among your colleagues? (if you/they move, is it to administration? different library same job? outside, i.e. private sector?)

<u>finally, your own personal feelings -</u>

The literature often mentions how online has actually increased workloads, takes more time, requires more individualized attention, and has the unfortunate corollary of all the accounting/paperwork. Even with all that...

30. Do you enjoy it? (why?)

30a. IF YES: do you wish you could do more searching and less of whatever else? (is it "fun"? does it provide autonomy? intellectual stretching?)

31. Do YOU feel better about your work, that your status has increased, as a result of online?

IF NO: what are the worst problems about it for you?
(do you feel it's overrated? a threat to your job? just "scary?")

<u>the last evil question:</u>

32. IS STATUS AN IMPORTANT ISSUE? Or are we wasting time here - should we just be getting on with providing information, however it's done?

33. Anything to add?

APPENDIX B - Privacy Statement

Your privacy: The purpose of this interview is to gather information for my term paper for LIS 566, Online Searching, at SUNY Buffalo. Your reactions and responses will be used anonymously in the write-up; no names or corporate affiliations will be mentioned. If it is necessary to establish the point of view of a response, identification will be only in generic terms: "Academic Librarian," "Public Librarian," or "Special Librarian." I do need your name for the list of references, but that is the only place it will appear.